

City of Cuttack: Crown, Capital and Commerce*

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No single definition can cover the whole gamut of question concerning various aspects of urbanization process. The very definition of a city has remained elusive. Validity of conceptual separation between a town and village has been questioned. The proliferation of new settlements with urban characteristics has made urbanization a complex phenomenon. V Gordon Childe had analyzed characteristic features accompanying the earliest city¹. Some of the criteria differentiating earliest city from a village are: bigger size and density of population, existence of non-food producing classes, appropriation of surplus of produce by a king or deity, monumental buildings, presence of priests, civil and military officers, system of recording and writing, artistic expression, external trade, society based on residence

and not on kinship. Toynbee says that a city should have a genuine community, defensive city wall, temple and a public hall². Mumford and Sjoberj have emphasized the role of political authority in emergence of towns³. Braidwood and Adam have given stress on cultural growth and cultural process respectively⁴. Some of these approaches are essential for study of urbanization.

Studying urban process and economy in their spatial and temporal diversity along with its historical context has been an unbeatable track among scholars of Indian history until recently. Its study in Orissa, whether eastern or western is virtually non-existent. The towns developed in whole of Orissa as centres of administration, pilgrimage and trade. In the absence of sufficient data, it is difficult to ascertain whether the political centres were also place of trade and commerce. The use of suffix like *pura*, *nagari* and *pattana* with administrative centres like Dantapura,

Kalinganagari, Simhapur, Suvarnapura etc proves that these were urban centres. Places of pilgrimage like Sriksetra Puri, Arkatirtha Konark and Ekamratirtha Bhubaneswar were not only religious centres but also functioned in economic milieu of the period. The temples became instrumental for the growth of market around them and pilgrims became consumers of the market. Possessing a long coastline, Orissa had number of seaports through which it established commercial and cultural intercourse with outside world. Places like Pithunda, Palura, Kalingapatnam, Manikapatna, Khalkattapatna, Konark etc became famous in international map. Some of these urban centres retained their importance in late medieval period and new towns also came up.

The general tendency among historians dealing with post-fifteenth century Orissa has been to project the period as one of urban decay and decline in commercial activity. According to them, the rule of imperial Gangas (1035-1435 CE) had witnessed efflorescence of Orissan society and economy. Towards the later part of Gajapati rule (1435-1537 CE) a process of decline in overseas trade began and with the coming of Afghans in 1568 CE and Mughals in 1591 CE, there was further deterioration. This argument was product of two mistaken beliefs. Firstly, the advent of Afghans marked the end of Hindu independent kingdom of Orissa. It has been conveniently forgotten that Cuttack, Puri and Balasore region, the seat of Afghan and Mughal power do not constitute whole of Orissa. Secondly, political developments should not be linked too closely with process of urbanization.

The urban centers of eastern and southern Orissa witnessed vigorous urbanization as ports along the coast of Bay of Bengal had played important role in trade and commerce in coastal and oceanic trade from ancient times. The present article would endeavour to delineate various facets of the city of Cuttack within the framework of urbanization process with temporal dimension from sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. This is the period of advent of European traders. The consequent developments like establishment of factories, role of the Companies and private traders, development in

communication and health system would be dealt with. The account of foreign travellers, factory records, Persian chronicles and indigenous literatures depict the city as a prosperous one having nice buildings and broad roads. The river Mahanadi provided communication network from the Chhatisgarh region to Cuttack via western Orissa. The river borne trade continued till the coming of the Railways. Cuttack was well connected with different centres of textile production. Its hinterland had abundance of corn, rice, pulse oil and butter. There was a mint and its silver filigree work was famous. The city also was commanding the Highways adjoining north with south India along the costal region of eastern Orissa. While travelling from north to south or vice versa, the traders, pilgrims and the invaders had to cross the river Mahanadi near Cuttack. Towards the second half of eighteenth century, rise of Calcutta fleet affected the fortunes of urban centers in Orissa. The European Companies and traders had already made inroads into the preserve of indigenous merchants. Although commercial traffic declined, Cuttack remained as the capital city under the British colonial rule.

The fortified city of Cuttack has been capital of Orissa for over eight centuries continuously. Its etymological meaning denotes a fort and capital city. Situated between 20° 27' to 20° 29' N latitudes and 85° 50' to 85° 55' E longitudes, Cuttack occupies a strategic position at the bifurcation of river Mahanadi and its branch Kathjodi. Beginning as a small rural area, its recorded history begins from the year 989 CE. The temple chronicle, the *Madhapanji* refers to the establishment of the city by a king named Nrupa Kesari⁵. His successor Markat Kesari built the palace of *Lalbagh* and latter's brother-in-law Nrusimha Rai constructed a stone embankment and steps leading to the river⁶.

Abhinava Varanasi Kataka was the nerve centre of political and economic activities under the imperial Gangas and Gajapatis. Definite evidence is available about the city during this period. It became the capital of the Empire and was a populous town in the medieval period. According to the land grant of 1230 CE by Anangabhimha III, the occupational group inhabiting the township covering *thirty vati* (375 acres) were perfumer (*gandhika*), dealer in

conch shell (*sankhika*), goldsmith (*suvarnkara*), brazier (*kamsakara*), seller of betel leaf (*tambulika*), maker of jaggery (*gudika*), weaver (*tanturvaya*), fisherman (*kaivarta*) etc⁷. The excavation of the Barabati fort also has yielded remnants of a temple, pillars of a palace, cannon ball, arrowheads and other associated structures pointing towards the existence of a city in the second and third decade of thirteenth century⁸. Gradually it was emerging as nerve center of political, social, cultural and economic activities of Orissa.

Cuttack continued to remain as capital after the defeat of Mukunda Deva in 1568 under successive regimes the Afghans, Mughals and *Nazims* of Bengal. From 1751, the Marathas ruled over until the beginning of colonial of the British in 1803. After 1568, it remained as provincial capital of catering to the needs of the center. Nevertheless, the city underwent remarkable metamorphosis due to changes in social and economic patterns. Its importance as one of the premier cities of Orissa continued in post-independence era after 1947.

The accounts of foreign travellers and contemporary historical works provide an account of urban growth of the city. It was the capital of Orissa under the Mughals and was designated as Katak Banaras in the *mahal*-list of Bengal province⁹. Abul Fazal, the court historian of Akbar writing in the third volume of *Akbar Nama*, that is *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions about his visit to Cuttack in 1592. The 605, 600 dam revenue yielding flourishing city has a nine storied building having residential apartment of governor, private houses, workshops etc¹⁰.

In seventeenth century, the political boundary of Orissa was subjected to changes and parts of it were controlled by neighbouring states. The area from Puri to Hijli coast was treated as part of Bengal. In the south, the Gingelly coast i.e., region between Ganjam up to river Godavari was regarded as part of Coromandel region. After coming of the Mughals, the southern ports of Orissa like Ganjam, Vizagpatnam and Bimlipatam declined to some extent. Probably the Mughal *subadars* and administrators showed indifference to the ports away from headquarters. Orissa was included in the *suba* of Bengal till 1607. The northern ports like Hariharpur, the port town of Cuttack, Pipli and Balasore would assume importance.

The decline of southern ports of Orissa like Ganjam, Vizagpatnam and Bimlipatam had resulted in shifting of commercial activity to northern region¹¹. Apart from consolidation of the Mughal Empire, the beginning of seventeenth century also marked the coming of European traders. The trading centres were established by the European powers and consequently urban centres like Cuttack, Pipli, Balasore, Harishpur and Hariharpur rose into prominence. The increase of price of staple commodities due to great famine of Gujrat in 1630-32 and scarcity of piece goods in Masulipatam compelled the English to move from Coromandel up the Bay of Bengal¹². Ralph Cartwright, William Bruton and four other Englishmen went to Cuttack to meet the Mughal Governor on 9 May 1633 and received the permission for trading and building of factories and ships¹³. He had mentioned about a palace and the big market inside it. From all the evidences it seems that it was the same Babrbati fort and not the palace of Lalbagh, whose construction stated in 1633. As been mentioned earlier, there was a palace in Lalbagh built by Markat Kesari and the Mughal governor Mutaqad Khan built another palace in the same area. Although the Lalbagh area is still there, there is no trace of the palace. The same thing happened to the English factory of the seventeenth century and the locality is known as *firingee* (foreigner) bazaar. The English endeavour to have direct commercial enterprise in Orissan coast was successful fro the year 1633. . Hariharpur was the first factory that English established. Situated at the mouth of river Patua, it was a populous place and three thousand weavers were present. Different varieties of cloth were produced in Hariharpur. The cotton stuff like *khasa* and *sahan* were being exported from there. Cuttack had become a populous city having big markets¹⁴. A mint was set up in Cuttack, from where gold, silver and copper coins were produced¹⁵. Its silver filigree work was in great demand.

Apart from the trade carried out by European factors, a brisk commercial enterprise went on by the free merchants and interlopers. Though the Europeans played an important role in the trade of seventeenth century, the Asian merchants had engrossed a major share¹⁶. The urban centres of Orisssa like Balasore and Cuttack saw

a trade pattern involving local people, immigrants from neighbouring regions and the European merchants. The Mughal aristocracy participated actively in trade from 1640s. They invested in shipbuilding. Starting from *subadar* and *dewan* to *shiqdar* and *faujdar*, the Mughal officials became involved in trade and commerce. There was wide distribution of merchants having diverse ethnic and linguistic origins. They were brokers of the Europeans companies and traders with their own independent capital. The traders from Gujarat and Rajasthan supplied different goods from rural hinterland to Cuttack¹⁷. Although concrete evidences to the activities of these trades are lacking, it is a fact that importance of Cuttack continued. It was the second best city after Dhaka in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa as mentioned by a visitor named Thomas Bowrey in 1669¹⁸. He had described it as a city having nice buildings, broad streets, water springs and ponds. The provincial governor was rich and the place was full of merchants. The large city with cannons placed on its walls had a factory belonging to the English and the place was famous for corn, cattle, butter, oil and cotton clothes¹⁹. Hamilton, who visited the city in 1708, found that different kind of fine and coarse clothes are much cheaper compared to Balasore²⁰.

Towards the second half of seventeenth century, a general decline has set in pertaining to trade and commerce of the different urban centers of Orissa. The European shipping was in ascendancy and Indian oceanic trade declined²¹. In the eighteenth century documents, Balasore and other places of Orissa is not mentioned frequently unlike Qasimbazar, Calcutta, Dhaka and Patna. Beginning from last decade of seventeenth century, the Mughal aristocracy began to withdraw from investment in shipping. The frequent change of *naib nazims* of Orissa and local officials posed hindrance to trade as earlier privileges given to the English factors were interfered and new demands were put forth. The repeated Maratha invasions from 1740s onwards disrupted the hinterland of Cuttack and Balasore. The news of impending raid by the Marathas created panic in coastal Orissa affecting the commercial life as Orissa was situated as buffer state between Nagpur and Bengal. The merchants were forced to withdraw their investment from textile industry. The activities were

in a much-reduced scale. There was general decline of Orissa's oceanic and coastal trade in eighteenth century.

There is no doubt that wealth in urban areas was derived from rural surplus. But the unique character of towns was due to commercial exchange and in this way; urbanization was result of developments happening on the seas. In case of the towns and other urban centres of Orissa similar thing happened. The European companies and traders had made inroads into the preserves of Indian merchants. Hinterland of port towns became accessible to the English. Orissa responded to the changing situation of Indian Ocean and there was decline of commercial traffic from coastal Orissa across the Bay of Bengal.

Orissa responded to the changing situation of Indian Ocean and there was decline of commercial traffic across the Bay of Bengal. Political dismemberment of the state under colonial rule and the British economic policy in Orissa sounded the final death-knell. Afterwards, the colonial towns like Cuttack, Balasore, Sambalpur, Ganjam etc responded in a different way to the changing pace functioning as colonial towns. But all those activities were in a much-reduced scale. The administrative measures of the colonial government resulted in change of social structure, mobility in occupation, decline in indigenous craft etc. There were major changes in economy and society of colonial Orissa in the context of colonial policy. Cuttack retained some of its earlier importance as it remained as the capital. After the occupation by the British in 1803, Cuttack was replaced by Puri as the administrative capital. But, again it was shifted to Cuttack, as the former was not suitable in 1816.

The city of Cuttack has remained as the nerve centre of social and cultural life of people since thirteenth century onwards. Apart from being a place of trade and commerce, artistic and religious activities centered round the city. After the victory of Afghans, Cuttack witness influx of different ethnic and religious groups from neighbouring states as well as far off places. It was emerging as a metropolis with influx of people belonging to different linguistic, religious and professional groups. There were not only merchants belonging to the Marwari and Gujrati, but also landlords and

moneylenders from the neighbouring Bengal. The rulers belonged to Islam from 1568 to 1751 and it became natural that along with ruling elite, there was coming of Muslim officials, traders, soldiers, scholars and saints. The demographic pattern of Cuttack was changed as many of the immigrants permanently settled in Cuttack. With the spread of Islam, there was also proliferation of Islamic institutions and monuments like mosques, mausoleums and *madrasas*.

Most of the mosques that were built in different parts of Cuttack were from 1660 to 1740²². The *dewan* of Orissa Mirza Zaffar built a mosque around 1660 and hence the locality is named as the *dewan bazaar*²³. Sahazada Begum, the wife of governor Ekram Khan built the famous Jama Masjid in 1690. One of the finest specimens of Indo-Islamic architecture, this mosque at Balu bazaar is remarkable for architectural style. The mosque built by Muhammed Ali in 1713 at Muhammadia bazaar is akin in style to the Fateh Khan Rahman mosque inside the Barbatī fort. The Oriya bazaar mosque has its own style. In 1715 the deputy Governor Sujauddin Muhammed Khan built the Qadam Rasul mosque. As the name suggest, it contains the footprints of Prophet Muhammed. The sacred relic was brought from Rasulpur²⁴ and officer named Hasmad Khan was in charge of it. The area is still known as Hushmat Sahi. The massive mosque, surrounded by a high wall also contains many graveyards of many notable persons like Azam Khan, Fateh Khan, Taqi Khan etc and tombs of saints. The Sardar Khan mosque, Paltan masjid and the mosque of Mansur Shah were some of the other mosques built in eighteenth century. The Islamic monuments of Cuttack did not rise to the same magnificence as of Delhi and Agra due to lack of royal patronage. Nevertheless these served the religious purpose and locality built round the mosques contributed to the growth of the city. The names like Muhammadia bazaar, Husmat Sahi, Azam Khan bazaar etc that are still in existence have derived their names from the monuments of this period.

It was not the Muslim iconoclasts but the peaceful missionaries of Sufism, endeavored for Hindu-Muslim unity. It also bridged the gulf between the Muslims of foreign origin and

local converts. The liberal atmosphere created by Sufism still lingers in Cuttack and the mausoleums of Sufi saints (known as *pirbaba* in local parlance) are visited by both Hindus and Muslims. The shrines of the Sufi saints like Hazrat Mansur Shah, Bokhari Saheb, Malang Shah, Mastan Shah etc is venerated by both the Communities. The mysticism, magical powers, kindness, religious tolerance and concept of equality of these saints created a liberal atmosphere in the city promoting harmony between both the communities.

Thus period under the review presents a scenario of a dynamic city having economic growth and social change.

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- 9 I. Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi, 1986, Reprint) P. 50.
- 10 Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol II, trans, H.S. Jarret (New Delhi, 1978), P. 130. The Lalbagh palace built in 1633 was the residence of provincial governors.
- 11 For details see, P.P.Mishra, "Urbanization in Medieval Orissa: A case study of Balasore and its hinterlands", paper read in the Urban history Conference, Berlin, 30 August to 2 September 2000, pp. 3ff.

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- 16 Mishra, n.11, p.6.
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